# Conducting a Mini-Lesson in the Content Area

The purpose of the mini-lesson is for students to transfer the content taught to that day’s independent/group work.

Effective mini-lessons follow a similar structure regardless of the content being taught. While the content can change from day to day and teacher to teacher, the framework of the mini-lesson remains constant. However, once a teacher understands and practices the mini-lessons there may be instances where the structure of a particular day’s mini-lesson may be tailored to match the purpose and content more specifically. An effective mini-lesson can be planned for about ten minutes. The entire mini-lesson should last no longer than 20 minutes.

Before you plan your mini-lesson, you need to determine your teaching point. A teaching point is a specific learning objective. What will the learner do? A teaching point might look like this: The student will select a topic for writing a nonfiction magazine article. Once you have a teaching point you can begin to plan the mini-lesson.

The structure of a mini-lesson includes four components:

1. Connection
2. Teach
3. Active engagement
4. Link

Mini-lessons begin with a **connection**, where the teacher talks about how today’s lesson fits into the work students have been doing and how it may fit into their lives. Next, the mini-lesson directly corresponds to a teaching point that is memorable and worth remembering. Content is **taught** using “During” engaging strategies. The teacher might demonstrate a particular strategy while teaching the content. Naming the strategy for students when it is modeled by teachers reinforces the ability of students to internalize the strategy into their learning repertoire. Make sure you give the students a quick opportunity to try what you have taught providing support. This **active engagement** involves students practicing and talking with a partner. This part of the mini-lesson is much like the See it – Say it – Write It strategy of direct instruction. The last part of the mini-lesson involves **linking** the lesson back to prior or new knowledge and relevant life experience.

Tips

* The mini-lesson begins with a connection that consolidates what the teacher has already taught as a way to review material and to set students up for learning something new. Explain why the content being taught today matters.
* The end of the connection is the teaching point and can be embedded by saying, “Today I will teach you that…” This is usually the learning objective.
* The active engagement part of the mini-lesson begins with the teacher saying, “Let’s try it.” The “it” refers to the knowledge that was taught. It is very important that before you let students loose to independent/group work that you know they are ready. Watch for student work that is not exactly what you want and redirect individually or whole group as needed. This part of the mini-lesson should take no longer than 5-7 minutes. The key is that it is a QUICK engagement activity.
* The mini-lesson directly correlates to Marzano’s 2nd design question, What will I do to help students effectively interact with new knowledge? Review Chapter 2 of the *Art and Science of Teaching* for further guidance on ways teachers can design good mini-lessons that include previewing, chunking, active processing, summarizing, notetaking, non-linguistic representations, questioning, and reflection.

# Sample Mini-Lesson Plan

**Teaching point (learning objective):** The students will choose a topic and write a non-fiction article for a magazine.

**Connection:** I was listening to the news last night and a story about triglycerides came on. I know that triglycerides have something to do with heart health and if they are high you have a greater chance of having a stroke or a heart attack. Other than that, I didn’t know much more. I asked my husband what he knew about triglycerides and 20 minute later he finally stopped talking. So, why did he know more than me? I think the topic of heart health was more important to him because his dad died of a heart attack in his early 50s and my husband is 50 now and worried that he might die too. So he has read a lot of the risks of heart disease and ways to stay healthy. So although he wasn’t writing an article about heart health, he sure could! So when you select a topic today for your writing find one that has some personal meaning to you. Maybe the topic is something you know a little about already, or maybe it is completely new but sounds interesting. Today I am going to teach you a technique that good writers use to help them focus on a topic. This step should take *less than five minutes*.

**Teach:** If your teaching point is to get your students to select a writing topic, then you must model selecting a topic. You could show the students a list of ideas for writing magazine articles that you brainstormed the night before. Perhaps you have ten ideas on the list. Write the list on chart paper or place it on a projection device. Think out loud about your thinking as you consider your topics. Which topic do you know the most about? Which topic is the most interesting? Which topic could you spend time writing without getting bored? Which topic has enough meat to actually fill up article space? These are the kinds of questions you would ask yourself (out loud) for this particular teaching point. Your goal is to show your students how you eliminate topics and select the best topic for writing. You could complete this step in *less than five minutes*.

**Active engagement:** The next step in teaching a mini-lesson is to actively engage your students. Active engagement can range from turning to a partner and talking to a hands-on experience. The key word is "active". Students are engaged in practice (trial and error) while the teacher monitors and assists their students. In the case of our teaching point on writing, students could work in partners to help each other talk through their writing ideas in order to choose the best idea. At the end of the session students should be ready to write. This step might take *five to ten minutes*.

**Link:** Before you leave the mini-lesson behind and release students to responsibility, bring your class back together (or meet with your small group or individuals) to share the learning experience. In the case of selecting topics students could share their writing topics with the rest of the class and tell how they decided on their topic. In this case, it's not the topic they chose, but the process they engaged in while choosing the topic. Don't spend more than *five minutes* for step three. You've got to get your students to work now! It's time to move into the independent/group work part of the lesson.